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ABSTRACT

An increasingly important element in the mission of the teacher education program at New Jersey's Montclair State University is preparing candidates for educating students to become engaged citizens who will work actively toward improving social and political democracy and be comfortable teaching diverse students. It is expected that effective teachers will understand the moral dimensions of teaching, be committed to enculturating students into a social and political democracy, think critically, and possess pedagogical skills and content knowledge to provide their students with access to knowledge. The school's admissions program was reconceptualized to seek and select students with predispositions congruent with program beliefs. The first step was creating the Portrait of a Teacher, which presents characteristics of teachers the school hopes to develop. Next, an admission evaluation scale was designed using criteria related directly to ideals depicted in the Portrait. The school believes that rather than being subjective and lowering standards, it is questioning current standards and admissions processes. The paper describes admission into the school's music education program to illustrate the interview process, using a composite profile of students who have been interviewed in recent years. It explains that this admissions process is a selecting-in versus screening-out process. (Contains 11 references.) (SM)

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Incorporating Concerns for Diversity and Social Justice in Admissions Decisions

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Too often, in teacher education programs, criteria used in admission processes are not consonant with the mission and goals of the program (Goodlad, 1990). In addition, past practice in admissions has been a process of screening out candidates, rather than one of selecting in candidates who may have a great deal to contribute to the program and to the profession, but who do not meet traditional selection criteria. As we rediscover the role of public schools in a democracy, admissions processes may have to change dramatically.

An increasingly important element of the mission of our teacher education program at Montclair State University is to prepare candidates to assume the responsibilities necessary to educate students to become engaged citizens who will work actively towards improving our social and political democracy. Inherent in this mission is the goal of preparing all teachers to teach in classrooms with diverse populations. Additionally, our expectations for teachers include the belief that effective teachers understand the moral dimensions of teaching, are committed to the enculturation of the young into a social and political democracy, can think critically, have literacy abilities, and possess pedagogical skills and content knowledge that will provide their students with access to knowledge (Goodlad, 1990).

One cannot presume that a teacher education faculty can transform prospective teachers with views antithetical to important program beliefs within the framework of their program. While teacher education students may be able to develop necessary pedagogical skills and content knowledge in four or five years, it is unrealistic to expect them to develop value-based and attitudinal perspectives that meet our program criteria within this time frame unless they are already predisposed to those ends. Therefore, we must reconceptualize the admissions process to seek out and select students with predispositions congruent with the beliefs of the program.

At our university we are grappling with the complexities that arise when we attempt to select students who have the potential to become the kinds of teachers we hope to develop (See Jacobowitz, 1994). To this end, we have revisited not only our admissions process, but also the mission and goals of the program, with the goal of joining explicit program intentions or outcomes to our selection criteria. We are attempting to change the paradigm for admissions, from a screening-out process to a selecting-in process (Scriven, 1990). Traditionally, faculty have assumed the major role in selecting students. Many students want to be teachers, but possess limited understanding of our program mission and requirements. We believe that, in order to make more educated decisions about our program, applicants must be fully aware of our commitment to the moral and ethical responsibilities of teaching and of the program requirements related to these responsibilities. To these ends, the recently developed Portrait of a Teacher (Jacobowitz, Baldinger, DeLorenzo, Enix, Jonsberg and Pines, 1994), which is a set of ideals that reflects the mission and goals of our program, has been included in the university catalog. Our

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admissions application also reflects the moral grounding of our program. Students applying to our program should be to some extent self-reflective based on their understanding of and commitment to our mission.

INSERT TABLE A: PORTRAIT OF A TEACHER

The process of revising our admissions criteria has evolved over the past eight years, and involved a collaboration of education, arts and sciences, and public school faculty and administrators. One of our first steps was to make explicit the characteristics of the teacher we hope to develop. This resulted in the Portrait of a Teacher. To us, an effective teacher is one who not only is knowledgeable about subject matter and skilled in representing this subject matter to students, but also has a particular set of dispositions, including: dedication to the democratic and moral dimensions of teaching; belief in the educability of all children; commitment to ensuring equitable learning opportunities for every child; and respect for individual and cultural differences.

After developing the Portrait of a Teacher, we designed an admissions evaluation scale (Jacobowitz, et.al., 1995), which uses criteria related directly to the ideals depicted in the Portrait.

INSERT TABLE B HERE: ADMISSIONS EVALUATION SCALE

Education as well as Arts and Sciences faculty involved in the admissions process at our campus have been trained to use the scale reliably. To date, the scale, which has a Likert format, has been used for four years. (While it is set up to rate students and tally these ratings, we have not, as yet, set a cut-off score for acceptance. Rather we use the scale to develop a common language among faculty and to educate students. If faculty disagree on particular rankings, they have a way of discussing their evaluations using the language of our mission.) Additionally, information about our mission and goals has been made available to candidates prior to their application to the program. By providing them with this information, we hope that we attract students who apply to our program because of their understanding of, and commitment to, our mission.

Our admissions evaluation scale includes multiple criteria for admissions, including commitment to teaching and an understanding of the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching. We developed these criteria so that they relate directly to the mission and goals of our teacher education program. We also questioned whether these criteria are and should be based on merit or worth using Scriven's (1990) distinction between the two. According to Scriven, merit is the extent to which the individual candidate measures up to the accepted standards of the program, while worth is the value of the student to the program. At present, most teacher education programs focus primarily on student merit. However, if we wish to shape our teacher education program to meet our mission and goals, we must also consider the worth of each student to that program. We believe, for example, that diversifying our program to include underrepresented groups, such as students of color, is imperative in that it introduces a variety of perspectives relevant to the mission and goals of our program. Without different points of view, we cannot enable all of our students to think critically about important educational, political, and social issues. It is our goal to select students who will enhance and contribute to our vision not only of what a teacher should be, but what a teacher education program should be.

According to William Bowen and Derek Bok (1998), defining a student's "merit" depends on what a university is trying to achieve. For instance, beyond the traditional considerations of grades and test scores, professional schools also take into account those personal traits that are likely to make a person a success in the chosen field--business schools look for

leadership qualities, medical schools look for empathetic individuals. Montclair State's teacher education standards, as embodied in our portrait, call for us to go beyond traditional admissions criteria to include dispositions towards issues of equity, diversity and social justice.

If we are to move toward the ideals of standard "h" in our Portrait, we need to select students who demonstrate a commitment to the moral and ethical responsibilities of teaching. If we are to achieve the ideal of standard "i," we need to educate students in a community that presents a diversity of ideas, perspectives, and experiences related to issues of social justice in a democracy. While some find such criteria "fuzzy," in that they are harder to assess than grades and standardized scores, it is essential that we find ways to do this. We have provided lists of indicators for each of our admissions criteria that help us to rate students.

INSERT TABLE C HERE: INDICATORS FOR ADMISSIONS EVALUATION SCALE

There are some of us who believe that we need to go a step further in adding indicators to item 4 in our admissions evaluation scale that would give extra points to students who not only have experience with diverse populations but who are from diverse populations themselves. This would increase such students' chances of gaining admission to the program given that many minority students who apply to our program have attended schools in poor, urban areas and may not have been adequately prepared for the rigors of college study. (Clearly, if we reach this point we would have to build in ways, such as our Teacher Education Advocacy Center, to ensure their success at the university. It would be morally unacceptable to select minority students to meet our diversity goal and then not provide them with needed support.)

According to Bowen and Bok (1998), there is a widely held belief that those students who have higher grades and test scores "deserve" admission more than lower scoring students because they have ostensibly worked harder to receive those grades. However, there is not always direct correlation between effort and outcome. Outcomes are more directly related to intelligence, which may be a result of inherited talents, family circumstances and early childhood; and to learning experiences, which include the level of teaching at the student's school and the degree of the student's exposure to test-taking strategies (Bowen and Bok, 1998).

Some might argue that in addition to being subjective, our criteria reflect a lowering of standards. At Montclair State, we have begun to rethink the concept of criteria and are raising such questions as: "Are the standards we are using serving to screen out students who have the potential to become the kinds of teachers we hope to develop--that is, teachers who are committed to democratic practice and the moral dimensions of teaching? Should our standards for selection be based on merit or worth? Are the standards precluding selection of students of color because they do not meet criteria that favor middle-class, white students? Should we have a 'one set fits all' approach to criteria or should we have a variety of criteria that will allow us to consider different types of students?" According to Sturm and Guinier (1996, p.977), "One size-fits-all testing may... compromise the institution's capacity to search for what it really values in selection." We also ask, "Is using one set of standards for all students fair or do these standards arbitrarily advantage members of one group over another? What steps can we take to shape our teacher education population so that it reflects the diversity of the student population in the public schools as well as provides a diversity of voices in our teacher education classes? How can we assess students in regard to such criteria as commitment to the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching? What are the legal implications of such decisions?"

While this list of questions reveals the complexity of choosing appropriate criteria for selection, it strengthens our belief that we need to find ways of being more educative and inclusive in our admissions process. We strongly believe that changing standards for these goals does not mean lowering standards. We see inherent value in alerting students and faculty during the admissions process to the goals and mission of our program. More important, we want to select in a group of students who see the value of learning in a diverse group with individuals who all have a commitment to equity and social justice.

In his discussion of the value of diversity, Edley (1996, p.127) claims that "inclusion empowers people to realize their full potential and contributes to the well-being of their families and communities." In their extensive study of the impact of affirmative action on college achievement and job satisfaction, Bowen and Bok (1998, p. 254) state that "there is no mistaking the predominantly favorable impression that students of all races share about the value of diversity in contributing to their education." In their survey of thousands of former matriculants who responded to their survey, "the vast majority believe that going to college with a diverse body of fellow students made a valuable contribution to their education and personal development" (p. 255).

In addition to this positive impact that diversity has been shown to have on the individual, it is critical that teacher education programs extend the benefits to children in the classroom. It is critical that such programs prepare all teachers, regardless of race, to teach in culturally diverse classrooms (Garibaldi, 1992). If we are to achieve this goal, we must overcome the parochialism that characterizes the majority of prospective teachers, who are typically white, middle class, suburban women (Zimpher & Ashburn, 1992). Because these prospective teachers do not reflect the diverse teacher population that we hope to develop, it is critical that we structure our admissions processes to attract students from underrepresented groups into teaching. Only then can we expand the conversations and dispositions of prospective teachers so that they will be better prepared to teach all children, regardless of their race, culture or ethnicity.

Admission into Music Education: An Illustration of the Process

Students may apply to the Teacher Education program after the completion of several pre-requisite education courses. Most students are ready to apply in their fourth semester of full-time study. The application includes the following items: 1)an essay question that serves as an indicator of the student's philosophical basis for educational decision making; 2) three letters of recommendation (two from faculty and one from an outside evaluator); and 3) the student's self-assessment regarding dispositions for teaching. After the application deadline, all departments with a teacher education program set up interviews with applicants and establish an interview committee consisting of at least three members; this committee must contain at least one representative from both the subject area and the College of Education and Human Services. Some departments have also included a public school teacher on the interview committee, a practice that we encourage while recognizing the possible scheduling difficulties. Interviews take place during a designated two-week period throughout the campus.

Given the above, we would like to describe a sample interview process in order to explain how we address our mission and goals. We have chosen to focus on the music education program as two of the authors of this paper represent the subject specialization and the College of Education and Human Services representatives on the interview committee. (At our institution, students are interviewed by faculty in their major as well as by education faculty.) Our description of the interview process is not based on any individual person, but rather a composite profile of the many students we have interviewed over the past five years.

In addition to the essay question that students complete at home, all teacher education applicants are required to write an impromptu essay. Music education students complete this on-site forty-five minutes prior to the interview. This essay then provides a basis for opening questions that spiral us into the Portrait of a Teacher and its implications for teaching and learning. Applicants not only discuss the Portrait of a Teacher in their prerequisite education courses but also receive a copy of the document in their application packet. The application essay, which is written at home, seeks to help students draw a connection between the Portrait and their evolving understanding of teaching.

INSERT TABLE D HERE: APPLICATION ESSAY

On the interview day, students arrive at designated intervals to receive their impromptu writing task. After writing the essay in a private room, the student joins the faculty committee. We arrange chairs in a circular pattern and invite the student to join us in the circle. The Coordinator of Music Education gives an overview of the interview process and explains the purpose of the interview as well as when the student will receive notification of his/her status in the Teacher Education program. The student is then invited to read his/her essay aloud as members of the faculty committee follow along with copies that the student has had duplicated prior to the interview. When students read aloud, it gives us an indication of their comfort with the language, their awareness of syntax, and their expressive quality in reading aloud.

The essay question itself is one of the more difficult aspects in the interview preparation. We try to construct a realistic problem that music teachers might face in the professional arena. In addition, we try to construct problems that have moral dimensions but no clear solution. All questions are designed to promote critical thinking; that is, students must make a judgment or decision and then support it with valid evidence. One question, for example, presented a scenario where a school district has decided to close the music program in the name of cost effectiveness. The student (who is to assume the role of a teacher within the district) must create an argument for the school board that defends the value of music in the schools.

Another question asks students to choose between two teaching positions:

> One position is situated in an upper middle class suburban district featuring a one-floor sunny, spacious building equipped with state-of-the-art teaching materials. Music supplies feature cutting edge technological resources as well as a storage room of relatively new instruments. The budget for music is larger than most schools in the area so you can comfortably buy new chorus music as well as classroom instruments and CDs. With a recent increase in enrollment, however, the music room has been converted to a science room requiring the music teacher to travel among the classrooms for music instruction. During your interview with the principal you learn of the school's philosophy: "Winning against the odds." He proudly displays the district's five-year award for the highest test scores in the region. You also learn that parents are extremely active in the school's operation and insist on representation in most decisions from curricular design to tenure determinations. Salary and benefits are in the upper range.
>
> The other position is located approximately 12 minutes closer to home and sits on the edge of a large city. Its three-story, red brick rectangular building towers over the modest parking lot and litter strewn streets. An alert security guard watches the parking lot and side door giving access to faculty via an electronic door device. The school is old but sparkling clean. Your music

> room is large and equipped with an old piano and an assortment of small instruments. Although the budget is small, it is adequate to buy supplies for the following year. During the interview with the principal, you feel immediately comfortable and able to converse about teaching methodology. She speaks with enthusiasm about the importance of the arts and how much the arts can contribute to the lives of these students. She also emphasizes teachers working together, authentic learning, and activities that celebrate human potential. Given the state support of this urban district, salary and benefits are equal to that of the previously described suburban school.

In the following interview, we asked a question that required students to choose one of two candidates for a select musical ensemble.

> As part of your teaching responsibilities at Sun Ridge High School, you direct a number of ensembles (you may choose to be the instrumental or vocal teacher). You have just completed auditions for the touring ensemble. This is a select ensemble, which rehearses advanced repertoire and performs frequently for the public. In fact, the principal has acknowledged this ensemble as "the school's best P.R. (public relations)."
>
> Here's your dilemma.... You have one spot left and must choose between two students described below:
>
> Max is the first one in the music room and the last to leave. He is not only attentive and serious during rehearsal but always offers to help with tasks like passing out music, setting up chairs, taking attendance, etc. He is a model student and well-liked by everyone. He has tremendous difficulty, however, maintaining his pitch in part singing.
>
> John is the best tenor you've ever had. Here is a student with a real chance at a professional performing career. A senior with a lax attitude toward rehearsal, he is always late and rarely prepared. Yet, even his sight-reading is of a high quality. He is talented and knows it--his arrogance has won few friends--but his voice could make the difference between a superior performance and a good performance.

Write an essay that explains the reasons for your choice and how you might explain this choice to the student who doesn't make it. Please bring the copies and original to the interview.

The first teacher education candidate's essay chooses Max for his select choir. He believes that hard work should be rewarded and that one cannot have a viable performing group if one of the members is irresponsible or unreliable. "The ensemble is carefully chosen to balance the vocal parts. If one of the students doesn't show up, the entire group suffers." We counter with the question, "But this vocal group is the flagship of the school. It is supposed to represent the highest quality singers in the school. How then can you justify choosing a less able singer over one who could actually raise the musical standards of the group?" Other questions follow. "Should school music performance ensembles attempt to create an environment like that of a professional music group?...Should the goals of a professional group and a school group be the same? Does selection of students based on ability contradict democratic practice?"

The second student answers this essay differently. She believes that to choose the less able student based on his positive attitude and strong attendance record instead of the

significantly more qualified singer is unfair to the group as a whole. "However," we counter, "your vocal ensemble has many public singing engagements. How can you showcase a group if you can't count on all the voices?" Unabashed, the student replies, "I believe a music program must maintain high standards if we are to convince the public that the arts are integral to education. I would not want to work with an unreliable student, so I would choose him on a probationary level with the stipulation that any missed rehearsals without a viable excuse will result in expulsion from the ensemble."

Both students, in the process of defending their answers, give perfectly credible arguments for their decision despite the fact that each chose a different student. A third candidate writes an essay based on her own very similar experience in a high school music program.

With this one essay, we are able to engage in a discussion of some of the following issues which relate directly to the Portrait of a Teacher:

1. Moral dimensions of teaching: What criteria do we use to choose one student over another?

2. Democratic practice: Should public schools have a different mission regarding student participation in music activities?

3. Critical Thinking: What evidence is most valid in supporting the argument? Has the candidate considered a variety of perspectives on the issue?

4. Teacher empathy: Is this a difficult problem to solve? Does the candidate empathize with the struggle accompanying such a decision?

5. Subject-specific understanding: How many ways could a music teacher solve this problem while still keeping the integrity of the program or ensemble intact?

In the rest of the interview, we try to address two other main area--questions about the take-home essay (Table D) and the candidate's subject matter competence. The take-home essay provides a second opportunity to probe the student's understanding of moral dimensions of teaching and democratic practice. Whether or not the candidate actually uses this terminology (e.g. moral decision, democratic) is of little consequence. We are much more interested in the candidate's grasp of these concepts within an educational framework. Our questions are designed to probe the commitment and reflection regarding the mission of our teacher education program.

There are many ways to determine the students' subject competency. In the music program, we evaluate their course grades, which must average 3.0, their evaluation by the applied music instructor, their ensemble participation, and their on-stage or in-class performance on the major instrument. In addition, we ask students to describe a piece of music that holds personal meaning and explain what it is about the music that touches them so deeply. Unlike non-art subjects, music is much easier to do than explain. Many composers, such as Mendelssohn, have written about the difficulty of describing music through words that cannot adequately explain the sound. Understandably, the candidates often have difficulty responding to our questions but eventually find the words to articulate their answers. From this response we get a good feel for candidates' command of music terminology, their ability to analyze the structures of music, their sense of historical context, and their ability to make affective connections with the music.

All departments are given a general list of possible interview questions for their teacher education candidates that allows students to address additional items in the Portrait of a Teacher. Within the music department we often refer to this list if we feel we need further information about a student's experiences or dispositions.

INSERT TABLE E HERE: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR ALL DEPARTMENTS

After the interview process, the committee members discuss their impressions of the student and compare their evaluations. Because of the specificity of the evaluation scale, we generally are able to reach decisions fairly smoothly. We do not view this part of the admissions process as a screening-out process but rather a selecting-in. If a student has scored particularly low in one area, we will discuss why this may have occurred and what course of action we should take; at times a student may be accepted on a probational status.

Next Steps

Over the past few years, we have continued to refine our admissions process to make it more congruent with our goals of diversifying our student body and educating all students about the mission and goals of our program. We recently learned that students graduating after 2001 will be required to have a grade point average of 2.75. (Currently, the requirement is 2.5.) We are concerned that this new requirement may preclude some students of color from graduating because, as discussed earlier in this paper, they may not have the requisite academic skills upon admission to succeed at college work. Recognizing the difficulty of raising the GPA considerably in two years, we are considering raising the admissions GPA requirement to 2.75 from 2.5 so as to ensure academic success and completion of the program. However, we realize that this will make it even more difficult for students of color to gain admission to our program. In the interest of diversifying our program, as well as placing value on other criteria students bring to the program, we plan to develop an alternate admissions process modeled on the one used at Colorado State University (Whaley, 1997). This process will accommodate candidates who have been adversely affected by personally challenging situations, resulting in poor grades. This alternate process will be available to all students and will allow students to make an argument for why they should be accepted into the program despite their lower grades. The Colorado model also provides bonus points to candidates who seek to enter a field underrepresented by their ethnicities.

Another step we plan to make is to standardize interview questions six and seven so that they will be asked by all departments (See table E). In this way, we hope to ensure that all candidates admitted into the teacher education program have the dispositions and attitudes necessary to teach to diverse student populations.

We also plan to increase the amount of time preservice teachers spend in urban schools working with students different from themselves. Currently, students have one field experience prior to admission in which they spend a total of three days in both an urban and suburban school. In order to extend this experience, we need to find more urban schools and teachers who will provide positive learning experiences for our students. To this end, we are currently nurturing several schools in surrounding urban areas.

Finally, we need to provide more opportunities for faculty who serve on admissions committees to discuss the admissions process in depth. Faculty from across our campus need to better understand the mission and goals of the teacher education program, and how they can determine students' predispositions towards these goals. We need to strengthen a sense of a shared vision with faculty in the arts and sciences.

Our Portrait of a Teacher and our Admissions Evaluation Scale have served as useful educational devices to educate both faculty and students to the mission of our Teacher Education program. They have helped us to unify our thinking in admissions decisions and have made students think more closely about the responsibilities of teaching as a career. As our program continues to evolve, we look forward to additional changes in our admissions process that will further us in our efforts to produce teachers who will serve as agents of change and protectors of social justice in our society.

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